MY FIRST BONSPIEL

Some of our kind Calgary friends gave Lethbridge the credit of having started Curling in 1887. This was a little premature. The first curling I ever saw was at Montreal in 1889 and was with the old irons.

Some time in the autumn of 1893 somr misguided person started an agitation towards building a rink. The only person I can think of as being responsible for all the subsequent misery was Tom Kirkham, grandfather to the present series, who had played second on the Mark Fortune rink, a consistent winner at all the bonspiels at Winnipeg in those days.

As Tom has long passed to his reward, and is not here to defend himself, he will have to shoulder the responsibility.

In the autumn of 1893 we shipped in two carloads of rough lumber from Washington, U. S. and, on its arrival, everyone who owned, or could borrow a saw or hammer turned out. The Alberta Railway and Coal Company had built a boarding house in the coulee north of the track to take care of their men during the building of the narrow guage line to Great Falls and laid a pipe line to it. As they kindly allowed us the use of the water, we picked the site for the rink as close to the pipe line as possible.

Whoever our architect was, if we had one, must have made a slight mistake in his levels, as we found later the northwest corner was about four feet below the south east.

We built a two sheet rink with a passage down the center and a small waiting room at the west end. After scraping about six inches of top dirt off the prospective ice surface and piping it around the edge we turned the water on.

"Where ignorance is bliss, tis folly to be wise".

Curious to relate, we could not make any ice in the low corner. Where the water went nobody knows (and he would'nt tell). Finally, during a severe cold snap, we managed to get a thin sheet if ice and kept building it up till we had a fair shewing. Then more troubles overtook us, as the ice commenced to heave, until you could'nt tell whether you were curling uphill or down.

We had little trouble with the south sheet. Sixteen pairs of stones- all colors, sizes and missfits- were brought in from the Hingston-Smith Company from Winnipeg, rinks chosen, and away we started.

One curious fact developed. Lo and behold, when the ice was finally ready, some of the faithful laborers who had assisted in the building and grading- more by expert advice than work- were strictly "in absentia". They could not stomach the all night watering job,but, when the genuinely faithful few went to curl, we found both ice and stones in their possession and had to wait their convenience for a game, so decided to fool them.

By the way, I dont know what misguided fool first invented pebbling the ice. I thought then, and have always since, that the natural ice makes for more variety in your shots. You never can tell where the stone will finally rest.

Our chance with the semi-faithful came next season. The genuinely faithful eight concentrated on number two sheet (it is not necessary to say that we were left strictly to ourselves) and arranged a game among ourselves, the prize being a bottle of scotch.

While we were enjoying this at the Lethbridge hotel Sergt Percy Belcher with Sergt Major "Black Jack" McDonald turned up. He had just returned from London where he had been one of a delegation celebrating the 20th anniversary of the arrival of the mounted police at Macleod in 1874 and, as he was leaving for Glenora the following morning, it was mutually agreed that he should have a game. This was about 1 A.M. We proceeded to the rink, the gang, by this time numbering about sixteen or eighteen.

We took Harry Mossop along with the hot water kettle in case anyone developed toothache or an attack of nerves. It has never yet been explained how three or four of the strongest temperance advocates accidentally found bottles of scotch about their persons on arrival at the rink.

Everything started strictly according to Hoyle. Eight were selected to start. By and by, Harry Mossop, finding no demand for the hot water "in natura" thought he had better sterilize it by a small addition of scotch, but must have set his sights a little too high, as it was not very long before the fumes began to affect the curlers and, foolishly, they began to drink the horrible concoction; first a drink after every end, then after every shot and, finally, go as you please.

It was a sight to see. One would play a stone, in any direction away from

himselfand the other twenty or thirty would start sweeping, themselves, or any thing moving near them. One would go down, then another, like tenpins, until at least 105 per cent were were flat on the ice.

At last the game became too strenuous, or, probably the scotch exhausted, so we adjourned to the waiting room.

All went merrily until Tom Curry commenced reciting Irish poetry. He would give out a line in Irish, then the interpretation in English. By this time Latimer had reached the "Hiccuppy" stage and, during a pause, gave voice to a perticularly loud belch, upon which, Tom, thinking he was laughing at his Irish, tied into him. After parting them the party adjourned . On going outside the waiting room we found poor George Robinson lying on the ice dead to the world, so carried him home to his welcome bed.

I wonder if "Black Jack" caught his train to Glenora next morning.

In 1898 a few of us decided to beard the lions in their dens at the Calgary bonspiel.

Four of us, myself, Sidney Herthiem, third; Dunc Duff, second; and Doctor Deveber, lead; decided to go. We outfitted ourselves with big blue fishermens' jerseys, with "USE GALT COAL" emblazoned on the breasts. I dont know what effect this had on my forlorn hopers, but I do know it certainly changed my own chest from its usual concave to a decided convex.

We arrived safely and put up at the Alberta, which I am sure we shall all gratefully remember because of the strong spiritual encouragement furnished us by Fred Adams and Tom Speers in the bar.

We had a little hard luck at the start by being drawn against the redoubtable Cully McNeil in our first game, with Nelse Hoad, third; Joe Ellwood, second; and a brother McNeil lead; a tough bunch, though we only lost out on my last stone. I have a good alibi, but, of course, you would not believe me, so why mention it.

BY the by, I sat next a beautiful matron at the Pioneers' banquet held at Calgary last year.

Having heard her addressed as Mrs Pearce, I asked her if she were related to William Pearce of the Canadian Pacific. She said, no, her maiden name was McNeil. No relation of Cully McNeil? He was my brother. Icurled against him in 1898. I'll bet he beat you. Well he did, as I'll bet he did many others.

Before I forget, I must Mention Hugh McLeod, who was not curling that season. During oue second game I heard a stentorian voice, "Is there a Macleod rink around here?" There was, and the poor little skip approached in fear and trembling. "Shake" and, producing a big flask of scotch, he passed it around. At every draw after this, no matter what time, day or noght, there was Hughie with the same big flask.

Did I ever tell you how Hughie once bought out the bell hop at the Cranbrook Hotel and served the curlers drinks at fifty cents per, cash strictly in advance. Next day George Hogarth said it was the largest week's take he ever recieved. Am afraid it is too long a story.

Big kindly Hughie. With a heart as big as an ox.

WIN

Our first was against James Aird, who was then living near Sheep Creek.

His rink appeared with large cardboards on their backs with " Galt coal not in it with Sheep Creek" lettered on them. Unfortunately, Galt Coal won out. I have had the pleasure of curling many a hard game against him since, many of them without the same success.

I may be pardoned, I hope, if I mention his two minor weaknesses. He was not at home on crookes Ice and, in his early curling, had no adequate defense against a hard running game, when all the men of the opposing rink were on. I do not know if he ever corrected the first, but, during the latter years of his life, the second did not seem to bother him, and when it came to a quiet draw game, did you ever see anyone who could beat him? He had an uncanny faculty of drawing to the button with his last stone.

A truly fine character, upright, as he always stood. I had the pleasure of observing him when he was serving of the council and I was on the police commission. Never the first to express an opinion, but, when he did speak, calm and considered, fearing no man's opinion. His decision usually settled the question.

It will always be a pleasure to his many old curling friends to know that his memory is perpetuated in the "Aird Trophy" given as the prize for the Grand Aggregate at the annual bonspiel here.

I wonder if anyone now remembers Paddy Nolan's address at the Alberta Hotel during the 1898 bonspiel.

I am afraid I cannot recollect all Paddy said, but this is the gist of it.

You all know that man Aird who comes from a small farm south of Calgary.

There is a small creek nearby of a sort of a tortuous nature, om whick they curl with wooden blocks. So small and narrow is the creek, that they have to post men at the turns to direct the blocks around the corners. And yet this man, Jimmie Aird, comes in here and, laboring under all these disadvantages, ~~comes in here~~ and beats the pants off Cappy Smart to the eternal disgrace of all the Calgary curlers.

And now for our crowning achievement. By the help of good luck and Hughie's good flask we managed to scratch through into the final of the visitors.

We were up against an Edmonton rink. Tommy Lauder, The short man with the long broom, which he managed to twirl in a complete circle faster than a plane propeller; Bill- No, excuse me, now the Hon William Calder, then school inspector. He is now enjoying a well earned rest in the musty shades on the senate. Always a whizz at whist and "Whisper it not in Gath" quite a dab at draw poker; Raymer, dont know his front handle; and a brother of Mr Short K.C. of Calgary.

I was staying with my aunt, while Short stayed with his brother, next door.

As we had not yet met in deadly combat, I used to call for him and we would walk harmoniously together to the rink.

On the morning ~~Izcałłać~~ of the final I called for him as usual and was rather astonished to learn that the game had been postponed. I urged on him the necessity of coming to the rink. As I told him, I considered it discourteous to postpone a game without notifying the opposing skip. No, they had phoned him the game had been postponed till the following day.

I wandered wearily to the rink, wondering if my overdrawn bank account would stand another day's expense. Lo and behold; when I arrived there, I found the stones all out on the ice. Lauder, Calder and Raymer- a craggy bunch- Raymer, playing second, with two pairs of stones.

By my grandmother's persian cat's long tail- No, no, Norrie. Let bygones be bygones. It surely could not have been that those three saintly persons could have deliberately misled Short, a green player, so as to have Raymer, a big husky, play two pairs of stones. Tut. Tut. No. Algernon, perfect gentlemen. No. Percy, nature's noblemen.

~~MXXXIXXXXXX~~

Damital. As Polly used to say "They were as crooked as a drunken rattle snake's trail".

I won the game with my last stone and we proudly walked off with the lockets. No alibi this time. Anyway you would not believe me, if I had one.